DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 746 HE 015 984

AUTHOR	King, Brenda; And Others
TITLE	Support Systems in Distance Education. Occasional Paper, Number 3, December 1980.
INSTITUTION	Deakin Univ., Geelong (Australia). Centre for Educational Services.
PUB DATE	Dec 82
NOTE	18p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Open Campus; n3 Dec 1980
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Advising; *Ancillary School Services; Comparative Education; Educational Technology; *Extension Education; *Faculty Advisers; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Mentors; Nontraditional Students; Open Universities; *Performance Contracts; *Resource Centers; Satellite Facilities; Student College Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Distance Education; Open University (Great Britain); Tutorial Mode

ABSTRACT

Several approaches being used to support students in distance education programs in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries are described. Britain's Open University support services are offered through tutor-counselors in about 260 local study centres throughout the United Kingdom. Students are assigned to specialist tutors who deal with the academic content of the course and mark their assignments. In addition, self-help or study groups are sources of support in distance education in the Open University system. In the United States, the mentor system and contract learning illustrate concern to develop appropriate support for students. Assigned to 25-30 students, the mentor initially helps each student develop an individual study program and is then involved in all aspects of the student's progress, with weekly or biweekly consultations. In University Without Walls institutions in the United States, a teacher-advisor helps students develop a learning contract that serves as a basis for evaluating each student's performance. Various types of educational technologies are also a source of support in distance education. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED227746

SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Brenda King, Deakin University
David Sewart, Open University
J. Eric Gough, Deakin University

HE 015 984

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. E. Gough

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Deakin University
Geelong, Australia
December, 1982

Open Campus

Occasional Papers published by
the Centre for Educational Services,
Deakin University, Geelong

Number 3, December 1980

INTRODUCTION

Distance Education is a growth industry, particularly at the tertiary level. New institutions are being created whose sole business is distance education. Institutions which previously took no interest in this form of education are entering the field. Those of which are recognised providers are seeking to increase their share of the market. This burgeoning interest is reflected also in the upgraded quality of educational materials: an upgrading represented not only by improved editing and graphic design but also by improvements in instructional design. Materials in print are being supplemented and complemented by audio and video programs. Telephone tutorials are increasingly being used. Counselling and advising procedures are being extended and refined. Regional networks of study centres are being established.

Much of this development has occurred within the last decade.

This is not to deny that the practice of distance education has antecedents stretching back into history. It could be said that it has its origins in the very beginnings of writing itself; the didactic intent of the historians Herodotus and Thucydides is just as apparent in Greece if the fifth century B.C. as it is in the epistles of St. Paul over 500 years later. However, only in the 20th century has distance teaching achieved international recognition. Some have seen it as an industrialised form of teaching arising out of new techniques perfected in the 20th century (Peters 1973). Others, while not denying the importance of new technologies, have seen in teaching at a distance a remedy for the rapidly escalating costs of conventional teaching, a labour intensive enterprise for which distance teaching offers a potentially cost effective alternative. Cost effectiveness has indeed increasingly become a major factor in this debate.

The possibility of supplementing or even replacing conventional teaching by distance teaching has had wide appeal. For developing countries without enough competent teachers, excellent materials for learning at a distance can be produced for wide dissemination through a relatively small but highly skilled workforce. In this way, it is theoretically possible to bypass the need for training a generation of teachers, thus significantly reducing the time scale required for a program for mass education. For developed countries the motives are more complex. Here education often helps fill the void of leisure time: this new aspect of education, as well as the more traditional need can be met relatively inexpensively by distance teaching. Moreover, even in developed countries the rapid expansion of knowledge in areas such as computing and electronics can outstrip the supply of trained teachers; distance education allows the existing experienced teachers to service a larger body of students.

Despite the changes referred to above the basis of distance education has always been the printed word. The 20th century, however, has seen new technologies used, in some instances quite extensively. Both radio and television open circuit broadcasts have been supplemented by audio and video replay devices which reduce time and lace restrictions and have often proved useful adjuncts to the printed word. The telephone added the possibility of immediate interaction that had been lacking in distance teaching. In some instances the telephone has been developed extensively as a teaching medium (Turok 1977) but its cost and technological development to date have stood in the way of more extensive use.

The Open University in the United Kingdom has been experimenting with other technological developments. They include:

> Viewdata, in which a television screen is linked to a telephone and thence to pages of data stored in a computer. The material is obtained through a small keyboard. The British Post Office already offers this facility (prestel) to certain homes; it may be available nationally within the next two years. The Open University is developing its own system, Optel, which offers more sophisticated options, including scrolling filial pages and an index.
>
> Cyclops, which in its simplest form consists of signals from an audio cassette being transferred to a visual format on a standard television monitor through the aerial input socket. The addition of a telephone link and a light pen for 'drawing on the television screen' can offer an interactive capacity.

Through these and other systems the 'technologies' of distance education can now embrace all elements of conventional teaching. Referring to the Open University system, Sewart (1975) notes that the conventional tutorial has been replaced by the use of television, radio and written correspondence: directed reading has been replaced by specially designed course units; and the study centre has become a base for student interaction.

There is one other significant, and more important change in distance education which should be mentioned: the increasing emphasis on the student learning at a distance, rather than the institution teaching at a distance. Because of this, individual support services have become an intergral part of an effective distance education system. Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) refer to this in their description of the Open University system:

> By linking each undergraduate student at foundation level to a tutor-counsellor and by continuing this association beyond foundation level wherever possible, the Open University has sought to meet a discerned need. It seeks to provide a continuous educational support which cuts across faculties. The frequent contact, whether by face to face or other methods, the subject link which is reinforced through the correspondence elements and the provision of sympathetic help in planning a beneficial work pattern, all these generate a sound basis of mutual understanding between students and tutor-counsellors at foundation level which students may rely on through their later studies.
>
> It is this relationship which breaks down the isolation of the home based students and begins to encourage and shape the effective dialogue which is the basis of education. There has always been a perspective which regards education as personal development rather than helping people to memorise information. The countinuity of contact and concern which is the basis of the relationship between a tutor-counsellor and a student facilitates this personal development.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977)

This individual approach must be viewed in the context of similar approaches which have been adopted in conventional teaching, particularly at the primary and secondary level, since World War II. In distance education such services have had to be adapted to the student population. A variety of systems has therefore arisen, depending on the geographical distribution of students, their level of study, length of study time and other factors.

Having said all of this it is clear that distance education presents a paradox. On the one hand there are the efforts being made to construct for the learner an educational experience that will be intellectually complete and academically respectable and which theoretically may be enjoyed without the requirement of attending the campus. (Not that all courses may achieve such an aim nor that all distance educational systems are without attenance requirements). On the other hand there are increasing efforts to improve communication and interaction between the distance student and his teachers and between the students themselves and indeed to make provision for attendance at centres other than the main campus. Amongst the more obvious efforts to achieve the latter aims are the networks of study centres being set up by institutions engaged in distance education.

This paradox highlights the two major components of a distance education system - the learning materials developed and the support services provided. Because learning materials of the kind published by the Open University, Deakin and some other institutions represent a significantly improved and distance quality of learning materials it is tempting to believe that the learning material is the only important element in a successful system.

It is the contention of the writers that the quality of both the materials and the systems developed to support student learning are critical to the success of a distance learning system. The present paper examines a variety of such services without presuming to provide a complete coverage. Clearly, the increased variety of approaches being used to support students indicates an increasing awareness of the importance of providing such support for students in distance education programs.

The Open University Study Centre Network

In January 1971 the Open University started a teaching program designed to provide a unique university standard education. Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) wrote about the difference between the Open University and the traditional university:

> The university was open in the sense that its courses were available to students irrespective of their occupation or previous educational background. It was not residential and its students would be working for their degrees in their spare time from their own homes wherever they lived in the United Kingdom. In addition, the university was open normally only to adult students over the age of twenty one.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977:1)

The same authors described work pressure, domestic demands and the more technical study problems of work scheduling, concentration and memory faced by many of the Open University students. Because of those problems they noted the need to provide effective support services for students. However, they noted that the factor of high motivation should also be considerd in the selection of successful support services. The Open University established a regional network of study centres as one form of support services. some 260 of these study centres, usually other educational institutions and open only in the evenings, were established throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They were located in areas of high population, or where transport links were good. Every student wasattached to one of these study centres and to one of the 13 regions of the Open University's decentralised system.

Each of the 13 regions has its own regional director responsible for providing local services to support independent learning. These services include:

- maintaining contact with local organisations (local education authorities, public libraries, employers) to ensure maximum benefit from facilities in that area,
- responsibility for running the local study centres and appointing local tutor-counsellors and course tutors; and
- liaising with central staff in the organisation of summer schools.

Although the Open University student works mainly at home, he or she can attend voluntarily one of the study centres.

These study centres are one part of a complex student support service which includes tutor-counsellors and tutors. The study centres offer students a range of facilities which can supplement some of those available at home, but above all, they enable student to meet each other and to learn from each other in discussion groups. The study centre is also the focal point for the undergraduate students' meetings with tutor-counsellors. These meetings are an important element of the program at foundation level where numbers normally allow provision for local contact.

(Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977:5)

The main purpose of this contact is to help students both academically and personally. Correspondence units and broadcasts provide the student both with information and guidance in a standard package. It is through the tutorial and counselling system, however, that this standard package is interpreted according to the students' individual needs.

The writers go on to say:

> When they begin their studies, undergraduate students are assigned to a tutor-counsellor at their local study centre. The tutor-counsellor will normally be responsible for all teaching and counselling in the foundation year, although in some instances (the science foundation course, for example) specialists may be brought in.
>
> The tutor-counsellor is available at the student centre on a fairly regular basis and may discuss strictly academic matters; he or she might also deal with study skills on a much wider basis as well as reviewing and assisting with the student's overall progress. As either a supplement or substitute (in cases where students do not attend study centres) contact between the tutor-counsellor and students is maintained by other means, including correspondence and telephone: In addition, the tutor-counsellor is responsible for assessing the material sent in by individual students. When the undergraduate student advances to post foundation level courses, the correspondence then is provided by a specialist course tutor who might also meet the students for tutorials or contact them in other ways.
>
> The tutor-counsellor then provides stability and continuity in the life of the Open University student; he or she acts as a 'general education advisor' at a local level, throughout the student's education career.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977:6)

The report of the planning committee on the Open University (1969) recognised the 'great advantage' that could accrue from face to face meetings. It is considered the development of the counselling service to be of particular importance. Part time face to face teaching and group discussion were to be components of a 'fully integrated teaching system' and the establishment of 'study' or 'viewing' centres was seen as a matter of urgency. It is worth noting

that the report, while affirming the principle of home based study, did not describe face to face meetings as optional or peripheral. Indeed, along with 'summer schools' they were seen as highly desirable features of the system's approach to learning. The term 'study centre' dates from a period when the Open University was contemplating in 1971, at its first intake of students, a year when only four foundation level courses were available and when some 25,000 students were admitted to these courses. Since the establishment of such centres was considered essential, they were equipped with the means for receiving BBC Television and VHR radio. Face to face meetings were encouraged at the study/viewing centres as part of the complete system.

The term 'Study centre' replaced at an ealry date, the term 'viewing centre' as the one in normal use. The phrase itself invites interpretation which, as the regional system has developed, might perhaps now appear somewhat misleading. The word 'centre' might be seen to imply a single place at which local services to the student are concentrated and upon which all local students focus as long as they learn within the system. Moreover, the term 'study' might imply provision for private study, perhaps away from the pressures of the home (this was cetainly envisaged as a possibility at the beginning). In addition, the word might imply the co-operative study of groups under the guidance of tutors. It was hoped that the student attached to a given study centre might also begin to identify with it and achieve some form of corporate identity so that a sense of community amongst the students might emerge. This sense of community then might find expression in social as well as academic activities.

That was the theory. In contrast with these ideas implicit in the original study centre concept, the practice is different in 1980. Students focus on the local centre only at foundation level and in the preceding advisory and induction phases. Although all students following post foundation courses are assigned a tutor-counsellor, the majority of them do not physically attend the centre to see the tutor. Rather theyuse the telephone or mails for contact. Very little viewing or listening takes place in the study centre; much of the open circuit broadcasting takes place when the study centre is closed. Likewise, little use is reported of replay facilities and, after only two years, the Open University had stopped providing Technicolour cassettes in study centres. Since 1978 it has sent via a postal library system, audio cassettes direct to the students' home.

After foundation level, tutorials take place only in larger and often distant towns (especially true of laboratory sessions where special equipment is needed), since the average course population then is less than 500 - that is, less than two students on average at each local study centre. Further, larger study centres used as central venues cannot cope either with the increased demand of the special requirements of some courses or the number of tutorials held on Saturdays, and so additional premises have to be used.

On the positive side, computer terminals (which exist in most study centres and are linked to three main computers) are used extensively by students, especially within the areas of mathematics, science and technology. Furthermore, a variety of additional resources such as Viewdata and Cyclops are planned for local study centres that will necessitate student attendance at the study centre.

The original notion of a corporate life for the study centre then, is not a reality in most cases. Though real and valuable when it occurs, it seems to depend not only on the congeniality of the centre but also on the disposition and character of a few energetic students.

Costs, however, have not changed. In the Open University it was originally expected that the cost of the study centres would be three pounds per student. In reality, the total costs in 1971, when there were 25,000 students, were 55,000 pounds. In 1980, with over 70,000 students, the cost has increased to 200,000

pounds. It seems remarkable that this figure still remains within the original estimate despite considerable inflation over the decade. However, Open University study centres normally are in educational institutions, and since the centres are open only on week day evenings, the additional cost to the host institution is marginal.

A number of papers have been written on the success of the Open University study centre system. Bradford (1979) for instance, writes that attendance at admissions advisory services, induction meetings, tutorial and counselling sessions, conditional registration meetings, social events, the organisation of self help groups, the vitality of student association and consultative committees, are all factors in the success of a study centre. Other factors may be relevant, such as accessibility, average distance from home, adequacy of public transport, comfort and atmosphere, type of building, room furnishings, coffee facilities, proximity of rooms, opering hours and the attitude of caretaking staff. However, he classifies these factors as 'details' and identifies the two principal reasons for the success of a study centre as the role of the tutor-counsellor and the type of institution in which the centre is housed.

Kirk (1978) supports Bradford's emphasis on the importance of personal contact as a vital component in the success of the study centre. The personal contact between student and tutor-counsellor are also seen as important factors by Mills (1978).

The role of the study centre has changed greatly from the original concept. It is inextricably connectd with the tutor-counsellor, who is the 'face' of the Open University to its students and the focal point of its student support services. The tutor-counsellor, therefore, is probably of prime importance in the success rate of students. Leaving aside the special function as a location for a computer terminal, it would appear that the study centre in the Open University can be described simply as the place in which the tutor-counsellor frequently operates. Tutorials (other than at foundation level), self help groups and student corporates life are not by any means common to all study centres. The success of a study centre is, to a great extent, dependent on the tutor-counsellors there. In the final analysis the study centre is merely a convenient base for the work of those tutor-counsellors. Indeed, tutor-counsellors operate effectively in certain areas without such a base: this has always been the case in the North of Scotland and the Western Isles.

If this analysis is correct it is the tutor-counsellor then, who is the vital element in the student support service in the Open University. Study centres are peripheral. The strengths of the Open University support service lie with the tutor-counsellors and not in the study centres themselves.

Variations on the Open University Theme

Fletcher (1975) comments that the Open University of Great Britain has provided greater impetus toward developing options for higher learning than any other educational movement in the last 100 years.

West Germany, Japan and South Africa have been influenced by the British model. However, Fletcher states that the impact of the Open University has been felt most fully in the United States of America.

Illustrations by way of example are provided by the external degree of Empire State College (ESC) and Syracuse University, both in New York state.

Empire State College had its administrative headquarters at Saratoga Springs, NY. Instead of a central campus however, it operates through a statwide network of 29 'learning facilities' (Gross, 1976). Some are complete 'learning centres', staffed with a number of full time faculty members and administrators. Others, called 'units' are more modest, perhaps directed by a single co-ordinator and several faculty 'mentors'. These are located in areas where there are relatively few students. (These learning centres are more akin to the Open University regional offices than to its study centres).

The major learning centres are in Albany, New York City, Long Island (suburban New York City), Rochester, Suffern and Buffalo. Each has a dean, administrative support staff, and a faculty of 13 to 15 full time 'mentors' who assist up to 500 students in developing individualised programs of study. A mentor usually supervises about 25 to 30 students, seeing each one twice a month, and sometimes once a week.

Keller and Meskill (1973) describe the future plans of Empire State to establish 'satellite' centres that would provide learning centres within commuting distance for most citizens of New York. Each would be administered by the dean of the regional centre. The 'satellite' centres would be responsive to changing needs and conditions locally; they could be expanded or discontinued as necessary.

An example of one such satellite centre, established in Manhattan's Regional Learning Centre, is called the Centre of Labour Studies. The Regional Learning Centre would have a small core faculty of mentors and a supply of teaching and study materials. Each satellite would be staffed by as few as one full time mentor or counsellor, and a complement of part time faculty and tutors, enough to serve the specialised needs of the local students.

Gross (1976) reports that the ESC centres also probed their communities to work out co-operative arrangements with business and social agencies. However, no evaluation reports have been published yet on the comparative success of this task.

The study centre as a support system in distance education has been used in other parts of the world, including Europe, Asia and the Southern Hemisphere. In most cases the British Open University model has been used, either directly or indirectly, in an adapted form. The Fernuniversitat in Hagan set up a system similar to that of the British model, with some 15 study centres. No evaluative reports have been published on their relative success as a student support system. The Fernuniversitat also has 'Mentoren', but they do not have special responsibilities for specific students as do tutor-counsellors in the Open University. The Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan has eight regional study centres controlling a network of smaller local centres. This university also has a tutor-counselling system based on the British model.

In the southern hemisphere, both Australia and New Zealand use the study centre as a support system in distance education. In Australia, Deakin University, the University of Queensland, and other tertiary institutions use different types of study centre systems to suit the particular needs of each individual system. Whilst they may have some similarity to the study centre system of the Open University, they have developed independently and owe little to the British system.

Massey University, in New Zealand, uses a system of local and area student convenors acting as representatives of the External Students' Society in centres throughout New Zealand.

In addition to the promotion of local study groups, conducting book exchanges and study skill seminars and activities related to extra mural study, the convenors promote a local source of information about study for students and facilitate communication between students and their Palmerston North based management committee.

Since the present paper suggests that it is the O.U. tutor-counselling system, rather than the study centres, that is the key to its successful support system, it might be useful now to examine the American mentor and the British tutor-counsellor system. Likewise, it might be helpful to describe contract learning and other variations of student support systems used in distance education. In view of recent observations on the use of study centres in the British Open University some interesting questions may be posed. For example, is the study centre anything more than a four walled 'shell' that houses the real 'egg', namely, the personal interaction offered by a tutor-counselling or mentor system? If it is nothing more, will the use of the study centre as a student support system lose significance and make way for alternative and more efficient means of support for students? In short, is the study centre as a support system becoming obsolete?

Other Methods of Providing Support Services

Until recently the hypothesis that face to face teaching and the presence of student peer groups could not be adequately replaced in distance teaching received almost universal acceptance. In the last decade and particularly in the last two or three years however, that hypothesis has been challenged by the success of the Open University and other distance education systems.

At the Open University, instead of the 90 per cent drop out confidently predicted in the educational press when the university first began, up to 60 per cent of students are graduating. In most Australian tertiary institutions with well developed distance education system, students at a distance do as well as or better than their on campus counterparts.

At the Open University it was found that a very significant proportion of the 40 per cent 'drop out' rate was unavoidable. Students left their studies for various reasons, including the obvious cases of death, significant changes in domestic circumstances, or satisfaction with the completion of one part, rather than the whole of a degree program.

The popular conception of the Open University is that of a system dominated by a highly structured package of correspondence texts and broadcasts. The package and its production are widely copied. However, the success of the British Open University does not rest entirely on this highly structured teaching package, an interaction supported by the counsellors and tutors in the regions. The success of the British system is based on the combination of these elements.

The British Tutor-Counselling System

Open University support services are offered through tutor-counsellors in some 260 local study centres throughout the United Kingdom. In addition, students are assigned to specialist tutors who deal with the academic content of the course and mark their assignments. The function of the tutors is exclusively related to the teaching package.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) see counselling in the Open University as distinctive. Its origins are embedded in the Report of the Planning Committee (1969).

> Because of the range of choices inherent in the degree pattern, 'the openness', of the university and the possibility that many students may wish to enrol who are not a stage when they could profitably pursue degree studies, we consider the development of the counselling service to be of particular importance. It will be the means by which the university can reduce to a minimum the number of students who embark upon courses only to find that they cannot continue with them.
>
> (Report of The Planning Committee, 1969:51)

Over the years, the initial counselling model has undergone certain changes. However, its function in the Open University remains vital to the success of the students.

The underlying concept of the British tutor-counselling system is 'continuity of concern'. By linking each undergraduate student to a tutor-counsellor at foundation level, and continuing this association beyond foundation level, the Open University provides continuous support which cuts across disciplines and faculties. Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) describe the relationship between the student and the tutor-counsellor as one which breaks down the isolation of the home-based student and develops the effective dialogue that is the basis of education. They note that this same relationship is effective in achieving the broader educational aim of personal development.

The tutor-counsellor therefore, emerges as the 'face' of the university. He or she becomes the bridge between the student and the institution. The tutor-counsellor is a mediator between course, tutor and student, ensuring that students understand the role of tutors and the support services available within the Open University.

The tutor-counselling service is staffed by part-time specially trained educational counsellors. The student to counsellor ratio is approximately 30 to 1. The main task of the tutor-counsellor is to provide students with information and advise on a range of educational matters and when necessary to refer them to expert advisory services. Tutor-counsellors also provide individuals with an opportunity to discuss their progress and future personal development. Tutor-counsellors might, however, offer specific advice in certain areas, including, information on credit exemptions, summer schools, registration, withdrawal procedures, examinations and honours degree requirements. They might also advise students on assignments, obtaining materials, appeals and other matters.

Clennell, Peters, Sewart (1977) note that many of the best ways tutor-counsellors have of getting to know their students well are informal. Although the study centre might be a convenient meeting place for the student and tutor-counsellor, it would appear that the use of the telephone and informal meeting places such as private homes and even the local pub, for instance, are more frequently used for this purpose.

The British Open University now employs some 2,000 tutor-counsellors responsible for approximately 70,000 students. That the Open University allotted approximately one quarter of its 1978 budget to this student support system reveals the importance of this service to the university.

The Mentor and Contract Learning

In the United States the success of the Open University in distance education stimulated an interest in the type of support services used by the British. Whilst not necessarily stemming from the tutor-counsellor system, the 'mentor' system and contract learning, illustrate a similar concern to develop appropriate support for students.

Empire State College was founded in 1971 and emerged rapidly as one of the 14 liberal arts colleges in the State University of New York system. Its mandate was to develop alternative approaches to higher education for those who could not or would not attend formal classes on a traditional campus. Therefore, the student population consisted of working adults with a full range of professional and personal responsibilities, similar to the profile of the average Open University student.

The academic program involves a process wherein the student's own objectives - personal, professional and intellectual - are assessed together by mentor and student and a pesonal program is drawn up. The system operates on this individual learning contract between the student and the mentor. Hence, the term 'contract' learning.

The mentors function in a variety of roles. Bradley describes their functions as follows:

> Like other faculties, mentors are trained in and represent the various disciplines, but they must work often beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and apply their intellectual skills more broadly.
>
> (Bradley, 1978)

Assigned to 25 to 30 students, the mentor initially helps each student develop an individual study proram based on past educational occupational experiences, interests and aspirations, and major activities spelled out in the learning contracts (Stern, 1975). The mentor is then involved in all aspects of the student's progress, including degree program planning and tutorial instruction. Consultation on a weekly or biweekly basis continues throughout the course of a student's enrolment.

The role of the mentor appears to be a very personalised one. In making judgments against a general academic framework, the mentor may take into account other factors such as ego, intellectural, moral and ethical development (Coughlan, 1979).

This aspect of the mentor system sets it apart from the British tutor-counselling. No reports on the Empire State drop-out rate are available, making it difficult to assess the success of the mentor system and contract learning.

Contract Learning and the University Without Walls

The concept of contract learning as described in a Ford Foundation report on open learning (Gross, 1976) places the student at the centre of the educational process rather than being confronted with a set of course requirements to be 'fulfilled'. The monitoring or counselling in this method of distance education suggests the need for a highly organised system of support.

The idea for the University without walls grew out of the experience of the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities in the 1960's (Baskin and Hallenbeck, 1972). In late 1969, planning for University Without Walls (UWW) began with grants from The Ford Foundation and other sources.

A task force of faculty, students and administrators at each institution involved in UWW helped develop the program. It was decided that each University Without Walls institution should function as an autonomous unit while the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities central office in Yellow Springs, Ohio, would service as the clearing house and co-ordinating body. Each UWW college had to shape its own program. Thus each institution dealt with distinctive students, building its own strategy for a new program.

After admission to a University Without Walls institution, students embark on an orientation process designed to prepare them for their UWW programs. Of prime importance in the process is a teacher-advisor (the mentor or tutor-counsellor counterpart) who helps the student define learning objectives, as well as the development and evaluation of his or her program. This advisor may be a faculty member, an adjunct member or some other person.

Working from an Inventory of Learning Resources the student and advisor design a program and draw up a learning contract. This initial 'contract' serves as a basis for evaluation of the student's subsequent accomplishments.

Learning activities may include regular classes (at the student's own or other institutions), internships, jobs and field experiences, independent study, individual or group projects, activities and the use of programmed learning materials, and cassettetapes. Not being fixed to any time schedule the student may plan his experience around a time period that best suits the learning plan.

Each student keeps a cumulative record of his or her learning plans, objectives and activities together with an evaluation of these experiences. Criteria and length of time required for the award of the degree are determined by the student and his advisor. Final evaluation of the student's work is by a committee of faculty, students and other persons with whom student has been working.

The factor of cost effectivenss in higher education has been influential in directing world wide interest to distance education. Unless new ways are found of decreasing costs of higher education, many institutions will be fighting for survival. One of the major objectives of the planners of UWW is that the program, while maintaining (if not improving) the quality of education, should be economic and self-supporting through tuition fees alone.

Self-help Study Groups

The concept of self-help or study groups as an additional source of support in distance education was again a feature in the Open University system.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) describe this concept of educational process as dialogue. It is dialogue not in the sense of interchange between teacher and student, but in the sense of Socratic dialogue - the pursuit of knowledge by two or more students who advanced towards this goal by mutual stimulus. They emphasise that if a study group is to be successful, it demands understanding of this concept and a commitment to it on the part of the students.

Some of the Open University regions formed a system whereby, tutor-counsellors adopted a co-ordinating responsibility for intitiating study groups in a number of post foundation courses. Students were asked if they wanted their names and addresses released to other students for 'educational purposes'. The role of the tutor-counsellor in relation to these groups was that of a catalyst rather than a teacher. Unlike foundation course groups, which work together with tutor-counsellors most of the time, post-foundation study groups consist solely of students working in a group. A tutor-counsellor or course tutor is only infrequently, if ever, present.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) comment that a successful study group must plan both method and content. (They note that the initial experience which the British Open University student has with tutor-counsellors in the foundation year should contribute toward the success of a study group). Tutor-counsellors may help choose the methods most appropriate for their groups. They identify the following element as critical to the success of a study group.

> Its members should have enough confidence in each other to be able to acknowledge freely their own ignorance and uncertainty.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977))

They report, as well, that a lot of use is made of the telephone by student groups, not only to consult the course tutor and tutor-counsellor but also for planning and preparing face to face sessions. Sewart (1975) investigated the value of self-help groups as a support in the British Open University, and described the following pilot scheme carried out in the Cheshire area in 1973. A total of 57 groups initially met in late January and early February 1973. By the end of September some 37 groups were still active and were viewed as having 'lasted' throughout the Open University academic year. Almost all the study groups met in the study centre. Of the 37 groups who met for the whole year, only two met each week; 15 met once per fortnight and 20 met less regularly. Of these 20, most met once every three weeks. The total average attendance of each group throughout the year was 180 out of a grand total of approximately 580. Thus approximately 30 per cent of the students attended regularly throughout the year. From these figures and their observations, Sewart therefore concluded that self-help groups as a support service could be regarded as significantly useful in a distance education system.

Self-help groups have been encouraged in other distance education programs. No evaluative information is currently available for comparison with the British reports, although Massey University in New Zealand has for many years encouraged a system of study groups and developed it to the extent of using an Extra-mural Students' Society to provide a number of student convenors who are responsible for organising and running a network of study groups throughout New Zealand.

The Use of Technology as Support in Distance Education

Gross (1976) makes the observation that the most direct way to broaden access to higher education is simply to make the best possible instruction available to the widest possible portion of the public. The Open University made use of television and radio to relay teaching to as broad a spectrum as possible. Across the Atlantic and in Europe, there has been considerable experimentation with the use of media in distance education.

In the United States, the University of Mid-America was the first to attempt widespread broadcasting of courses. In 1971 the University of Nebraska developed the first plans for a television based open university in the midwest.

The University of Quebec (UQ) created the Tele-Universite in 1972 as a service organisation, and has a counsellor figure within the system similar to the American mentor and the British tutor-counsellors. These moniteurs-animateurs are not academic specialists but persons with backgrounds similar to those of the students. One third are, in fact, enrolled students themselves, and a few of the remainder hold any special qualifications beyond a first degree.

In Sweden, the Committee for Television and Radio in Education (TRU-I) launched a university program pilot project between 1967 and 1972. However, unlike the British use of the media which was totally independent and endorsed by the government, the TRU project encountered problems which caused Vanderhayden and Brunel (1977) to conclude that there can be really no efficient multimedia educational service without an important degree of independence.

Teaching at a distance relies now and will continue to rely upon printing. Other technologies have supplemented this but none has replaced it. The telephone, for instance, has offered a direct substitute for student/tutor interaction. However, the telephone is limited, since tutors and students must have their interchange at the same time. It is further limited both by the requirement of an installation and by the cost of the link. Furthermore, it can be noted that telephone lectures or tutorials between one tutor and a number of students, while far less costly in tutor time, begin to pose some of the disadvantages of radio in that tutors are deprived of non-verbal signals. Tutors using the telephone tutorial tend to teach at their own pace and their students refrain from interrupting.

There are similar disadvantages to radio. The use of audio and video cassettes, however, can ameliorate these problems by offering the student an opportunity to view and listen at his own pace. The availability of replay facilities is the only restriction but interaction between tutor and students is virtually non-existent within this medium.

Printed material, radio and television then can be used only for the simple transmission of subject matter. Assuming replay facilities, all can be used by the student in his own time, with the wide dissemination of equipment in recent years, all are, or could be, independent of place. They are, however, the tools of teaching at a distance and do not permit interaction. Only the telephone offers this.

Despite the drawbacks, an Open University report in 1979 advocated technological innovation applied in various forms. It was suggested that such innovations could be used to provide more effective and efficient teaching learning and the optional use of increasingly scarce resources.

Conclusion

It becomes increasingly obvious that successful distance education systems need a solid background of effective support systems to ensure success for their students. What, then, is the true nature of efficient support services?

Delling offers the following descriptive and definitive statements:

> What the learner really needs - also in distant study - is someone who can help him, who organises learning opportunities, who learns together with him, who explores and examines (Greek sysetein). In an organisation that develops distant study courses, many different people have difficult tasks. There exists, however, no job for a 'teacher' there.

He proposes the use of the concepts 'distant study' and distant study course and defines them as follows:

A 'distant study course' is an artificial dialogic learning opportunity in which the physical distance between the learner and the helping organisation is bridged by an artificial signal carrier. 'Distant study' then, on the basis of a distant study course is an eight-dimensional system of learning processes and communication processes by means of artifial signal carriers. The dimensions are: the learner, the society, the helping organisation, the goal of learning, the contents to be learned, the result of learning, the distance and the signal carrier.

The processes are learning processes in the learner, in the society, and in the helping organisation, and communication processes between the three.

The function of the 'helping organisation' is to take over, upon the wish of the learner, everything he cannot (yet) do for himself, with the tendency that the learner eventually becomes autonomous. Finally, the only function left for the helping organisation is that of an information and documentation centre (as, for example, a good library).

(Delling 1976: 19-20)

Thus support services in distant education should be of a varied nature to provide optimal learning situations in the individualised mode of distance education. Organisations in such systems of education need to examine and evaluate carefully, the effectiveness of selected support systems, whether they be study centres, a mentor/counsellor system, the use of media or contract learning. Students learning alone and at a distance lack the supportive atmosphere of the tutorial class. They have no one to measure themselves against. They do not know if they are doing well. Easy comparison with the peer group is not possible.

Any system of distance teaching must, therefore, concern itself not only with 'what' is teaching and 'how' it is taught but with the quality and effectiveness of its support services.

References

Baskin, S., and Hallenbeck, E. (1972). Nontraditional Program of Undergraduate Learning: University Without Walls. *Compact*, October.

Bradford, M. (1979). Study Centres: The Background to the Current Policy Reviews. *Teaching at a Distance*. No. 16.

Bradley, P. (1978). *The New Professional: A report on Faculty in Individualised Education*. Saratoga Springs, New York: Empire State College.

Clennell, S., Peters, J., Sewart, D. (1977). *Teaching for the Open University*, Walton Hall, Open University, Bletchley, Bucks, England.

Coughlan, B.H. (1979). *The Mentor Role in Individualised Education at Empire State College*. Paper presented at the ASPESA Conference, Perth, W.A., August.

Delling, R.M. Telemathic Teaching? Distance Study! ICCE *Newsletter*. Vol. 6,2,19-20.

Fletcher, M.A. (1975). The Open University of Great Britain: Its Influence on Nontradtional Education in the United States. *Drexel Library Quarterly*, Vol.11 No.2.

Gross, R. (1976). *Higher/Wider/Education:* A Report on Opening Learning Ford Foundation, New York, June.

Keller, L.D., and Meskill, V.P. (1973). Empire State College - Fad or Innovation? *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. XXV No.3 Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London.

Kirk, P. (1978). Study Centres: Some Impressions. *Teaching at a Distance.* No.11.

Mills, R. (1978). Student Support and Advisory Services in Distance and Adult Education. *Teaching at a Distance.* No.11.

Peters, O. (1973). Die Didaktische Struktur des Fernunterrichts Untersuchungen zu einer industrialisierten Form des Lehrens und Lernens.

Report of the Planning Committee to the Secretary of State for Education and Science, (1969), HMSO.

Sewart, D. (1975). Some Observations on the Formation of Study Groups *Teaching at a Distance.* No. 2.

Stern, B.H. (1975). College Without Walls: A Teacher's View. *Liberal Education,* 59.480-489.

Turok, B. (1977). Telephony: a passing lunacy or a genuine innovation? *Teaching at Distance.* Open University No. 8.

Vanderheyden, K. and Brunel, L. (1977). *University at Home.* Harvest House.